The Post Natural Wilderness & Its Writers

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Abstract

Many nature writers over the past half century have conveyed the news that nature is dead; the titles alone, from Silent Spring to The End of Nature inform us that the "old verities" (including belief in nature's essential purity, stability, abundance, and ability to rejuvenate and heal) have given way to an era when the turn of the seasons and even the kind of weather we experience are no longer certain. Humans have entered an anthropogenic stage when all of nature appears to bear the mark of human activity. Salmon swimming to the remotest lakes in Northern British Columbia have contaminated those lakes with dioxins from their bodies; DDT sprayed in southern Asia to fight malaria ends up in the flesh of humans in the far north. Even stranger is the fact that new wildlife refuges have spontaneously arisen in the most contaminated and dangerous sites in the world: Chernobyl now has a flourishing animal population and the Korean DMZ is alive with animal and bird life. How do contemporary nature writers respond to this new Post Natural Wilderness? What does this landscape tell us about the natural world and our ability to live with it? Using the works of several contemporary writers who have investigated the Post Natural Wilderness, this paper examines the strategies used by contemporary writers to chronicle their encounters with this strange new landscape, along with the surprises and occasional bitter ironies that emerge from it.

One of the most significant and unique contributions of American literature to world literature has been its articulation of the aesthetic, ethical, political and spiritual values of wild nature. Typically such values are discovered when the author partakes of a solitary excursion into a more-or-less pristine wilderness. Very early encounters with the North American landscape tended to record the "morning freshness of the continent" (Lyon, 16) and the abundance of nature. Later writers noticed, however, gaps and missing pages in nature's text, and writers of the twentieth century often found themselves writing to defend some embattled natural area. Writers of the twenty first century appear to be facing a still different landscape; one that is now so thoroughly imbued with the human that it seems a new set of rhetorical skills and tropes are needed to articulate the values of "wildness" for a new age.

The ability of contemporary nature writers to find a clear voice has been complicated not only by the androgenic trends facing the global environment, but by a twenty year academic critique

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which has deconstructed or "problematized" the presumed hegemonic idea of the wild. The assumptions underpinning the arguments for wilderness protection have been scrutinized over the past two decades and found to be deeply flawed. Thomas Birch in an influential 1985 essay, "The Incarceration of Wildness," for example, points out one of the most troubling aspects of wilderness protection when he writes that it is merely a "cloaking story to cover and legitimate conquest and oppression" (5). Taking another tact, the political scientists William Chaloupka and R. McGregor Cawley suggest that the environmental "rhetoric of wilderness," by "elevating land over humans," has in effect, diminished "several other histories, most notably histories in which naturalistic terms conspire with hegemonic power to deflate the hopes of women, blacks, Indians, and every group marginalized as the human Other." (20) Feminists have also developed a diverse number of challenges to traditional wilderness ideals; showing that the wilderness is typically associated with masculine values, while domesticity is associated with women in an unacceptable binary opposition. The novelist Marilyn Robinson has suggested that because wilderness is "where things can be done that would be intolerable in a populous landscape" (247) we must now surrender the idea of wilderness, and accept the fact that the consequences of the human presence in the world "are universal and ineluctable" (254). Collectively such critiques have "mortally wounded" traditional ideas of wilderness in the opinion J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (12).

What confronts contemporary nature writers in contrast to past writers is an understanding of nature as thoroughly anthropogenic—something confirmed by the flesh, bones and blood of wild animals, fish and birds even in the remotest wilderness areas (Krummel et al). In this paper, I will suggest a three-part categorization of the new anthropogenic wilderness as a way to open up a discussion and understanding of "post natural" nature writing. I will further suggest that these categories—the gated suburban nature patch, wasteland exploration, and the new post natural wilderness reserves—correspond to a kind of graduated intensity of unnaturalness. This is not to suggest that there are not still writers who trek off to Alaska, or Northern Canada for a wilderness experience, or that there aren't still being written the kind of rambles, adventure, rural and farm writing that Thomas Lyon was able to offer as a complete taxonomy of nature writing, but that a more startling view of nature is now revealing itself, one that can't be entirely incorporated in old genres, at least not without bearing a heavy burden of irony.

Surburban explorers find pockets of wildernesses close to home and wildness still in tact, primarily because a certain baseline of more-or-less clean water, air, and soil is needed for humans themselves. This kind of writing, offers us some familiar tropes. For example, wildness is still observable, and nature still infused with a shining light in Annie Dillard's 1974 exploration of her Virginia suburb, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.* True there is something unsettling about the "monster in the mason jar" (61) but there is also something profoundly reassuring in the idea that "wildness" still existed in a landscape filled with cows, Kleenexes, and parking lots. This is not pristine country by any means, and yet, according to Dillard, wildness still existed, a kind of creative energy that could never really be extinguished by human actions. This was a good message and important message to take back from the suburban fields; a sort of having your cake and eating it too.

A more nuanced, informed, and up-to-date report is found Frederick R. Gehlbach's fine book entitled Messages from the Wild: An almanac of Suburban Natural and Unnatural History published in 2002. Distilled from observations made over thirty years in walks along a ten acre forested ravine in central Texas, this book is a report from the front lines of the nature/culture

interface. It is an unusual book in that only one other compilation like it exists in North America (211).

The ravine is a mini wilderness, a pocket of wildness, surviving not through a sweeping wilderness act, but because it enhances property values. Ghelbach arranges his book along the traditional scheme of changing seasons. Winter represents survival, spring is renewal, summer is a melody and autumn is a winding down. In each season a variety of incidents are recorded for each day of the month. Gehlbach is a keen observer and his training as a biologist and ecologist helps him know what to look for. In October of one year he plants the seed of the Ohio buckeyes at marked locations to study the time of this species mid winter sprouting at the southern limit of its natural range. (13) He bands and weighs birds and has a particular expertise and knowledge of screech owls. He also performs more mundane roles, every winter becoming the "creek's trashman" as he picks up a winter's accumulations of "broken plastic and clay flower pots, bricks, boards with nails, t-shirts, underpants, socks, "bubba" hats, plastic marking tape, ribbons, broken plastic sewer pipe—I could go on and on about human refuse that washes into storm drains or is tossed in the ravine" (20). The self-appointed inspector of snowstorms of Thoreau's era has been unwittingly transformed into an inspector of human debris.

Still the range of creatures making their living in the ravine and in the surrounding suburban yards is at first glance astonishing. Galbach guides us through the variety, by knowing what to look for; seventy plants encountered in a year, migrating butterflies from east, west, north and south are described as a "potpourri of travelers" visiting the ravine (108), mammals include flying squirrels, raccoons, coyotes even, once, a sighting of a bobcat. There are toads, lizards, frogs, snakes, dragonflies, spiders, and a variety of birds. There is also evidence of wildlife being able to persevere in suburbia—Galbach sees a Carolina wren nest in a hanging basket near the front door of a neighboring home. "The pair's success is a testament to persistence and flexibility, which are important traits in a fast-changing environment such as suburbia" he notes (165).

What emerges however is not the same kind of conclusion that Dillard arrived at thirty years previously in her walks along Tinker Creek. The life flourishing in Galbach's ravine does so because it is both carefully managed and because the kind of species that flourish there can tolerate humans. Because of the length of time spent with this particular bit of land. Galbach does not suffer from "ecological amnesia," a disease common to much of suburbia. Galbach himself offers a baseline against which he can trace change over the years. In this way he can distinguish change with is a part of natural seasonal fluctuations from change caused by unnatural activity around the globe. Perhaps the most notable difference he traces from the beginning to the end of his explorations is the continuing erosion of diversity. The ravine and the surrounding suburban enclave, unfortunately, acts as a type of gated community—favoring some wildlife while shutting out other species. "When occasionally asked what traits allow native animals to live in suburbia," Galbach writes,

> I answer that they are small to moderate in size, so they don't require a lot of space and aren't so likely to be noticed. They like edges, eat a variety of foods in a variety of places, including our feeders, and can use our houses for roosting, nesting, and food storage. They are nocturnal, behaviorally inconspicuous, or

> beautifully colored, cute or innocuous, so we don't persecute them. The cadre of jays, opossums, robins, rabbits, doves, squirrels, swifts, crows, finches, martins, and raccoons is widespread in suburbia (186).

Other species, however, are less fortunate and "(c)ars, pets, poisons, and power tools are in the arsenal of cultural weapons" that destroy them. One day as he was driving down his street, the car in front of Galbrach stopped abruptly and "two women with baseball bats and four uniformed children ran to the front and began pounding on the pavement. I pulled over in time to see the last pieces of a harmless yellow-bellied racer smashed into the asphalt…." (83). Clearly this species doesn't have membership in the psychically gated community of Galbach's suburbia.

Such treatment of wild things is not new, nor particularly unusual. What is slowly revealed, however, over this thirty-year period, is a continual lessening of diversity of life in the ravine. Habitat loss in the tropics, means a 50 percent decline of summer birds that typically migrate to the tropics (32). In the 1990's Galbach notes that of thirteen original summer residents only five remain. (50). Rare birds like the painted bunting, orchard oriole, and wood thrush, disappear as nesters from his area. The reason why is the fragmentation of their habitat and is a side effect of suburbanization with its manicured yards which favors other opportunistic species such as the brown-headed cowbird which now over-winter in Texas because of suburban food sources and global warming (50). Purple finches are no longer appearing in huge flocks during the winter and Galbach speculates that the warmer weather could be the cause, allowing the finches to winter further north.

Suburbanization is itself one of the most significant threats to wildlife today, after global warming and deforestation, but it does have the virtue of allowing an interface between the natural and unnatural. Some neighbors are more sensitive to the life around them than others: some neighbors do keep their cats indoors; some grow bluebonnets and wildflowers in their front yard, refusing to mow their yards until threatened by the city; another neighboring family builds a back deck around a tree and have the pleasure of watching raccoons from their picture window. In other words they are willing to modify some cultural habits and conveniences in favor of natural values. But what emerges from Galbach's writing, ultimately is a sense that the majority of his human neighbors lack the knowledge or information to make wise choices about preserving wild land, or wild life. Noting that a questionnaire on community values placed natural beauty fourth behind schools, housing and safety, Galbach writes "Thus do most of my neighbors value cultural creations above natures, perhaps not knowing or remembering that all are gifts from a world that people did not create" (191). This bald sentence encapsulates the essence of the environmental crisis engulfing everyone in the suburban mileau.

Some areas initially seem more resistant to human desires and such areas—bogs, marshes, escarpments, steep hillsides—have tended to receive the onslaught of human industrial detritus because they are viewed as wasteland. Yet even in wasteland natural processes can be observed at work though they are not the type traditional natural history writers tend to focus on. In Robert Sullivan's The Meadowlands, for example, he notes that the original inhabitants of the area outside New York City "was comparable to the number of cars on the turnpike on a Friday night before a holiday." The comparison does two things simultaneously—it describes the current environments and subtly allows the reader to compare car "species" with previous inhabitants. In the past wild turkeys lived on the edges of the marshes, along with plovers,

partridges, wood and water snipes, pheasants, heath hens, cranes, herons, bitterns, quail, merlins, thrushes and scores of songbirds. Bald eagles, falcons and numerous species of hawks circled the huge meadowlands sky. In salt water that by 1970 would be nearly incapable of supporting life, Indians fished for codfish, weakfish, herring, mackerel, thornbacks, flounders, plaice, sheepsheads, and blackfish. In freshwater they fished for salmon, striped bass, drumfish, shad, carp, perch, pike, trout, roach sturgeon, bullheads, suckers, sunfish, eels and lampreys. On islands in the marshes there were elk, deer, wolves, beavers, mink, otters, fishers, catamounts, hares, martens flying squirrels, bears, and mountain lions. Huge flocks of red-winged blackbirds and passenger pigeons flew through the skies of the Meadowlands (37).

Here indeed is a stark picture of nature transformed. The original abundance of wild creatures has been eliminated and replaced by the vehicles racing over the turnpike, vehicles which undoubtedly include a few Mustangs and Rams. In what sense then is Sullivan's explorations of the Meadowlands a wilderness adventure? Danger comes not from crouching mountain lions but from placing his canoe in waters off the New Jersey Turnpike, accompanied by a "gnawing consideration of the toxicity of the environment." The thrill of spotting a rare bird is transformed into sightings of police emergency tape, an abandoned step ladder, a giant antenna, fences topped with barbed wire, a creek strewn with trash. Rather than the discouragement of bad weather, insects or spoiled food, which are frequent motifs in past wilderness, accounts, the low point of the expedition comes "when we found ourselves in a shallow sewerlike creek, the bottom of which was completely covered with garbage. It was disgusting to say the least. It was a hidden berm of trash, a refuse-strewn Sargasso Sea, and as we paddled, huge chunks of ripe debris rose up, as if from a field of underwater cabbages: a foul borscht. The smell was unbearable, and we paddled carefully "(83). If this is a wilderness adventure it is one given new meanings by a new kind of wilderness; a place isolated not by its remoteness or distance from humans, but by its toxicity and foulness. Danger lies not in the rapids or cliffs or wild animals but in its toxicity. Oddly enough encounters with less compromised areas seem to also distress the narrator and make him uneasy. At one point he finds a small tributary and another marsh, an area "starkly different" and the narrator is "shocked by its pristineness, by the absence of the tall, obnoxious reeds. When we finally moved into it, it was as if we had just come out of a trance. The water was shallow now, at low tide, the floor of the marsh a creamy gray, dotted with the borings of little creatures. A shiver ran down my spine. It all seemed strangely natural" (85). In another context we might imagine a writer being shocked by coming across human refuse in a pristine mountain setting.

Still, natural forces are at work in the toxic Meadowlands landscape, illustrating in this most polluted state, the interrelated laws of ecology. The garbage hills are alive with little organisms that "After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide ad warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadowlands' fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the Earth-protecting layer of ozone. Not only are these tropical winds expelled, but the hills also expel leachate; a black ooze, or garbage juice. Sullivan points out that the juice "would mingle with toxic streams, and perhaps dilute whatever drop of water in the region might somehow be without the trace of humankind. But at this moment, here at its birth, at a stream's source, in the modern meadows, this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc" (97). In other words, purity is now a word that is best understood when used to describe pollution. Because nature is now anthropogenic, purity exists as a way to describe pollution.

Both Sullivan and Gehlbach use their books to examine the on-going debate about the various strands of environmentalism. Given the post natural wilderness facing the new naturalists what is the appropriate response? Gelbach, writing from his wilderness enclave in the Texas ravine, notes that in terms of preservation and conservation issues "big is the operative world." Not only do large landscapes allow the survival of large numbers of native species, they "also permit them to stay farthest away from humans, which is usually the healthiest thing to do." Nevertheless, smaller areas of cluster housing with connected natural remnants are more realistic in suburbia and inside the sprawling suburbs, "such development may be the only way to save nature's daily marvels and support systems." In a similar way, Sullivan closes his book with a chapter entitled "The Trapper and the Fisherman"; a portrait of two men who have very different ideas about how to "save" the meadowlands. The debate revolves less around the polluted state of the area, and more on what strategies will work to keep human activity at bay—the same concern that Gelbach notes in his own book, about a very different type of livable suburban ecosystem. Clearly the greatest threat to any area is not pollution, mobsters, or garbage, but humans themselves. "The Trapper" in Sullivan's book hopes to preserve some areas of the medowland in a quasi-natural unnatural state, by promoting development in others—a new shopping mall, a fun park and fourteen thousand new residential units. "The Trapper" who works for the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission, believes that with careful development, people living along the Meadowlands, and with education, portions of the meadowlands could be rehabilitated and preserved. Wasteland could be converted into a more desirable gated wilderness. "The Trapper" bases his argument on the idea that humans will not support protecting an area unless they have some knowledge and association with it. In contrast, "The Fisherman" who is a member of a volunteer group of River Tenders believes that the meadowlands—even in their toxic state-- are already over-developed and advocates a hands off approach even though he clearly understands that the area is unnatural.

A final transformation of a contemporary understanding of "wilderness" comes with the final category of the post natural wilderness reserve. Unlike the musings between "The Trapper and The Fisherman," however, here there are no arguments over management strategies for these intensely unnatural areas. This last category refers to dangerous areas where humans are excluded. And it is human exclusion from these areas that makes them wilderness reserves. I have stood at the DMZ between North and South Korea, astonished by the birds and other forms of wild life that was evident there. Not surprisingly, there is a proposal by the DMZ Forum, a coalition of conservation and peace groups, to preserve this area for its wild life values. Rocky Flats in Colorado, a radioactive wasteland, nearing its final stages of clean up, is slated to become a wildlife preserve for deer, prairie dogs, hawks and coyotes. Humans will be allowed to stroll through the area, although a 500 acre industrial site will remain permanently closed to the public. Chernobyl, currently hosting tourist groups, has become a de facto "wildlife preserve" with academic expeditions into the most radioactive zones of the area reporting abundant wildlife, and a positive increase in biodiversity. Moose, roe deer, Russian wild boar, foxes, river otter and rabbits were all spotted inside the exclusion zone—though none of these species, with the exception of rabbits, were seen outside the 30 km zone. Wolves, eagles and an endangered black stork are more commonly sited inside the expulsion area. One team headed by Robert Baker and Ronald Chesser found more small rodents in the exclusion area, and a greater diversity of flowers and other plants in the highly radioactive regions. The report concludes that "In reality, radioactivity at the level associated with the Chernobyl meltdown down have discernible negative impacts on plant and animal life. However, the benefit of excluding humans from this highly contaminated ecosystem appears to outweigh significantly any negative cost associated with Chernobyl radiation." (Baker)

Over a decade ago Christopher Manes wrote that civilization was lethal to wilderness. At the time this seemed like an extreme statement by an angry young man; yet his assessment reverberates to the present day. Is our civilization "lethal" to the natural world? Is this what the postmodern wilderness—these areas of exclusion, wastelands, garbage dumps, cramped suburban refuges, ecological hotspots, really shout out at us? If so, can we now propose a coherent response to the years of academic criticism of wilderness, wilderness writings and wilderness thought? For now it should be perfectly clear. What is most lethal to the wild is not radiation or land mines, not pollutants, or suburban lawns, not gender roles nor our inept social constructions of this or that. Humans are more lethal to wilderness than radiation. What on earth are we to make of that? What future literary form will possibly be able to encompass the enormous outrage contained in such an insight?

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